

# Mauna Kea telescope protesters say stone altar was destroyed

September 16 2015, by Jennifer Sinco Kelleher

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In this Aug. 31, 2015, file photo, Kupono Mele-Ana-Kekua, who opposes the construction of the Thirty Meter Telescope, blows a conch shell near the summit of Mauna Kea on Hawaii's Big Island. People protesting the construction of the giant telescope on Mauna Kea, a Hawaiian mountain they hold sacred, are decrying the destruction of a stone altar they built near the construction site. The altar known as an ahu was built June 24, the day hundreds of protesters prevented construction crews from reaching the telescope site. (AP Photo/Caleb Jones, File)

People protesting the construction of a giant telescope on a Hawaiian mountain they hold sacred are decrying the destruction of a stone altar they built near the construction site.

The altar known as an ahu (AH'-hoo) was built June 24, the day hundreds of protesters prevented construction crews from reaching the telescope site on Mauna Kea (mow-NAH' kay-AH').

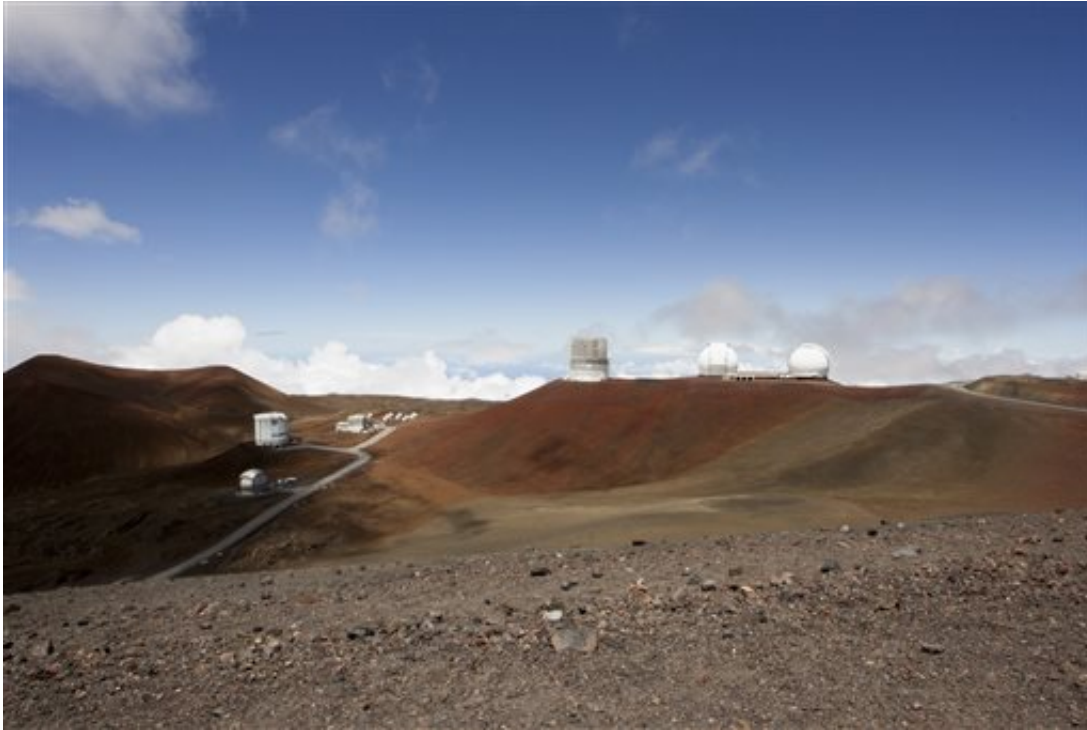
"About a hundred people or so contributed to this ahu I would guess," Lakea Trask, one of the protester leaders, said Tuesday in describing how stones were passed person-to-person to erect the 4-foot-high structure at an elevation of 11,000 feet.

"Basically, it's a religious altar or shrine. It's not just a stack of rocks. It's the focus of the energies of our pule—our prayers—our spiritual connection to the land," Trask said. "It's like a hate crime to us."

The group of people who have been camping regularly on the mountain to prevent crews from returning hadn't checked on the ahu for a while, Trask said. Every second Sunday or so, some of them visit the altar to give offerings, usually water or bundles of leaves from the Hawaiian ti plant, he said.

On Sunday, "when they went up there to check on it, there was no ahu," Trask said. "And in its place there was a bulldozer."

A Mauna Kea Support Services employee removed the altar sometime before Aug. 25 to reach a pile of materials needed to grade the access road, said Dan Meisenzahl, a spokesman for the University of Hawaii, which is responsible for the mountain's stewardship.



This Aug. 31, 2015, file photo shows telescopes on the summit of Mauna Kea on Hawaii's Big Island. People protesting the construction of a new telescope on the mountain, which they hold sacred, are decrying the destruction of a stone altar they built near the construction site. The altar known as an ahu was built June 24, the day hundreds of protesters prevented construction crews from reaching the telescope site on Mauna Kea. (AP Photo/Caleb Jones, File)

"Now, unfortunately, the nearest material pile was behind this particular ahu," he said.

"If this particular employee had checked with his supervisor, this wouldn't have happened," Meisenzahl said of the altar's removal. "This honestly is not how we would have liked this to happen. ... Given the current situation on the mountain ... I don't think we would have proceeded that way."

Protests against the \$1.4 billion Thirty Meter Telescope have been

growing statewide. Dozens of people have been arrested for blocking construction workers or violating emergency rules created to stop people from camping on the mountain. Work has stalled since April amid the protests, and the nonprofit company building the telescope hasn't indicated when it will try to resume construction.

Protesters are feeling emotional about the altar's removal, Trask said.

"It almost felt like we were being provoked to respond," he said. "It's just another kind of adversity we face as people trying to practice our religion ... on a [mountain](#) that's the most sacred to us."

But after discussions and prayers, the protesters are vowing not to let the incident distract them from protesting with peace, Trask said.

Protesters say they don't want another telescope on Mauna Kea, which they liken to a temple.

Meisenzahl said he doesn't know if the worker knew it was a religious altar.

"I don't think it was malicious in intent," he said. "I think he was just trying to do his job."

What happens to the worker would be a personnel issue that the university can't disclose. "But in all honesty, he didn't violate any existing policies or protocols," Meisenzahl said. "It was unfortunate."

Two other ahu remain on the [construction site](#), Meisenzahl noted.

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